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SEX-ROLE ATTITUDES AND DIFFERING LIFE-STYLES OF PROFESSIONAL MARRIED WOMEN

ABSTRACT: In view of the current interest in social attitudes towards sex roles, this research was undertaken (1) to survey professionally-trained married women regarding current sex-role attitudes and preferences, selected biographical data, and life-style choice; and (2) to determine relationships and/or differences existing among these variables and other psychological test data. The Sex-Role Inventory (Schmidt, 1972) established itself as a valid instrument in differentiating the traditional and liberationist groups, as well as among groups with differing life-styles, sex-role attitudes and preferences, and levels of cognitive dissonance. The EPPS and Study of Values also differentiated among the groups.

Social attitudes about sex-roles have been implicated as a key issue of debate in the recent challenge to society offered by the women's liberation movement. Although gender-defined roles (masculine-feminine) occur in a variety of settings, they are most precisely specified within the context of the family. Relative to

this, the traditional role of women within the home and the concept of conventional marriage have become a focus for discussion and social scientific research.

In the past, sex-role attitudes were clearly defined. Women were expected to marry and to bear children. In this situation, they were seen as important contributors to the maintenance of the family unit and therefore to the social system as a whole. These sex-role expectations had general approval, thereby providing women with a well-defined, socially approved-of direction for life from which they could attain a sense of purpose and derive a system of meaning. They contributed and were contributed to. Security and self-esteem were possible. Both men and women knew precisely what their gender-related roles would be. Children would be cared for and the family base within the society would remain stable. Therefore, any alterations in these expectations would seem to generate far-reaching personal and social consequences.

With the onset of the first feminist movement in the early 1900's up to the late 1930's, the boundaries defining these sex-role expectations became blurred (Myrdal & Klein, 1957; Sutton-Smith, Rosenberg, & Morgan, 1963). Women fought for and achieved new status. Privileges in work and education were won. With a widespread acceptance and popularization of Freud's theories, a more permissive attitude toward sex became common (Friedan, 1963, 1970). Although these changes, along with an increased need for women to participate in political and economical activities, had several important consequences, little long-term effect was realized. Having gained these opportunities, women appeared to return to the home (Bernard, 1964; Greer, 1970; Rossi, 1965). Post-war years were marked by a rapid rise in the birth rate. The late 1950's and early 1960's saw the re-establishment of the traditional role (Bachtold & Werner, 1970; Greer, 1970; Maccoby, 1963; Rossi, 1965).

Today, women's liberation is challenging the traditional mode as being inadequate for women in the modern world. In fact, what is occurring is that women in the movement are attempting to destroy the stereotyped attitudes which they feel have held woman's potential in serious bondage. They simply ask: How can one half of the world's population continue to be constricted to one role — to the fulfillment of their wombs; with the crises we are facing we need to mobilize our woman power and alter the social definition of what is the "good life" for both men and women. Boundaries defining appropriate sex-role behavior have been loosened. Liberationists appear to be directed toward objectives of greater equality and opportunity for choice in terms of roles for women. Their concept of freedom often removes women from the expectation that life's meaning and purpose must be found within a traditional family framework. Modern women, therefore, are facing increasing freedom to consider alternate life styles. They are having to confront decisions to choose their own roles, their own place of social and personal worth. This must be done without clear support from a society that was evident in the past regarding the traditional role.

PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS

As a response to this confrontation with feminine history, this argument with what was in the past deemed as woman's destiny, several profound questions regarding the potential loss of the traditional role become apparent. For example: 1. What might happen to children if women no longer saw themselves as child-bearers and nurturers? 2. What might happen to the structure of the North American family if women no longer defined their basic purpose in life within a patriarchal family? 3. How would such changes influence the organization of the total social structure? 4. Furthermore, what would be the psychological consequences for women faced with a variety of life-style possibilities? Would they be positive or would discrepancies between traditional and modern sex-role attitudes produce feelings of inner conflict or, as Festinger (1957) refers to it, cognitive dissonance in those women most aware of such issues?

The current debate then seems to be deeply ideological in character and as such expresses a need for change in present trends within existing occupational and educational distributions of the sexes (Bem & Bem, 1970; Lipman-Blumen, 1972; M. Mead & Kaplan, 1965).

THE RELEVANCE FOR PSYCHOLOGY

Contemporary information in this regard is of particular relevance for the guidance counselor and the counseling psychologist both of whom frequently encounter women in situations of career guidance, vocational interest, and aptitude assessment or psychotherapy. It has been noted that counselors often uphold the status quo. Women are directed into occupations considered traditional for females or are counseled to find fulfillment within the context of home and family. It has also been pointed out that this type of direction frequently bears little relationship to the needs and abilities of the individual concerned. What happens to people when they follow goals that aren't totally consistent with personal needs? G. H. Mead (1934) discussed the importance of congruence between social roles and the self. He stated that a role is best performed if it is consistent with one's basic nature. Sarbin (1943) translated this into a testable hypothesis, suggesting that the effectiveness or validity of role enactment is related to the degree of congruence between the self and that role. In Festinger's (1957) view, discrepancy between personal needs and social role demands is explainable in terms of one's history of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the personal experience of inner turmoil due to two value- or behavior-opposed cognitions. Festinger further explained that when an inconsistency exists, the relative cognitions tend to alter or change to reduce the conflict and restore consonance. The greater the discomfort, the more the pressure to reduce it. In the case of the modern woman evaluating her own traditional role alongside contemporary trends, these factors could well operate. For example,

those women who begin to make a greater distinction between their roles as mothers and/or wives, and their needs as persons apart from these, would likely experience greater cognitive dissonance than those persons wherein the two roles were congruent.

According to Festinger (1957), the dissonance would be experienced in the form of increasing insecurity regarding satisfaction with the self and in most cases an increasingly strong attempt to resolve the dissonance and to bring the opposing roles together.

These factors, these questions, as well as their inherent demands of us as women, as psychologists, as persons who are concerned, and as people who can envisage a society wherein mental health and opportunities for personal self-realization for all are encouraged, have provided the impetus for this work.

The general statement of the problems for the present study were posed as follows: What sex-role attitudes, preferences, and life-style choices are current among modern women? What is the level of satisfaction of women with their present sex-roles in relation to possible alternatives? The investigation approached the problem through the use of a sample survey procedure. The purpose of the research was two-fold:

1. to survey professionally-trained married women regarding current sex-role attitudes and preferences, selected biographical data, and life-style choice; and
2. to determine relationships and/or differences existing among these variables and other psychological test data.

The investigation of the problem was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics, sex-role attitudes, and life-styles of professional married women?
2. In relation to sex-role choice, many women still choose the traditional role of wife and mother while others choose to combine this with a career. What personal and psychological characteristics are relevant to these decisions? How do these differ among women with varying sex-role attitudes and preferences?

The present study was exploratory rather than confirmatory and, as such, was conducted in two parts: Part I — a mailed sample survey; and Part II — a followup procedure consisting of a battery of psychological tests.

METHODOLOGY

During the study, professionally-trained married women, residing in Edmonton, Alberta, participated in both the survey and the follow-up session. In order to collect the data, a survey form, the Sex-Role Inventory (SRI, Schmidt, 1972) was developed.

The final form of the SRI consisted of six sections. Sections A and B were designed to obtain biographical and early childhood information. Section C provided sex-role attitude scores and defined respondents by a total score indicating whether attitudes were traditional

or liberationist. The final sections of the SRI, sections D, E, and F, dealt with sex-role preference and cognitive dissonance.

Sex-role preferences were discussed in terms of tasks necessary to home and family care. Subjects were asked to state who presently performed each task: (a) self, (b) husband, (c) other, and then were also asked to express who they would prefer did the task in relation to these response categories. Comparisons were made between actual behavior and stated preference. Statements indicating dissonance were developed in terms of sex-role related tasks and value expectations normally found within the context of the family. Respondents were asked to reflect about their own situation and express relative feelings in terms of the following categories: conflict-no-conflict; very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied. The presence of dissonance was defined in terms of the frequency of responses indicating a disparity between what was actually happening within the context of their homes and their present feelings about it, regarding whether or not they would like to change their situation.

THE SURVEY

A letter inviting participation as well as the SRI survey forms was distributed to each member of a sample consisting of 290 professionally-trained married women chosen at random from a population of 1500. Questionnaires were returned by 180 women. Of these, 151 were in an intact marriage relationship, had properly completed the questionnaire, and were therefore eligible for the followup.

THE FOLLOWUP PROCEDURE

Each respondent who had properly completed the SRI was invited to participate in the followup phase of the study. Each participant was required to complete a battery of psychological tests consisting of the following: (a) the Study of Values, (Allport, Vernon, & Lindzey, 1960); (b) the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, (Edwards, 1953); (c) the Security-Insecurity Inventory, (Maslow, 1952).

On the basis of the information gained from the SRI, six sub-sample groups were formed:

- Group I (T) — tradition-oriented or traditional
- Group II (L) — liberation-oriented or liberationist
- Group III (W) — working
- Group IV (NW) — non-working
- Group V (C) — children
- Group VI (NC) — no children

For the purposes of comparison, sub-groups were contrasted in pairs: Group I (Traditional) vs. Group II (Liberationist); Group III (Working) vs. Group IV (Non-working); Group V (Children) vs. Group VI (No children). This dichotomization appeared meaningful in light of findings and comments of recent research and literature relevant to this work. When subjects had completed both the survey

and the followup, responses from the tests were scored and tabulated. Appropriate statistical tests were applied to the data.

GENERAL BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Considering the findings regarding biographical data of the total sample it was found that participants were largely Protestant and upper middle class. Among husbands of respondents, 81 percent were professional or managerial with 74 percent earning \$15,000 or more yearly. Although all the women who participated were professionally trained, those who were presently working or who had worked, earned less than their similarly trained husbands.

Few families had three or more children. In terms of how respondents delegated the major portion of their time, 25 percent were homemakers, while 70.9 percent were employed outside the home on either a full or part-time basis. Fifty-seven percent of the total group worked as full-time professionals. Of those who were working only 11.9 percent reported that they worked purely for personal enjoyment, while the rest were employed for financial reasons plus enjoyment.

Forty-eight of the women had pre-school children. Of the 32 who worked, only three mothers utilized day-care or kindergarten facilities, while the remainder made private arrangements. Although actual usage of day-care centers was sparse, 70 percent of the total sample approved of public day-care facilities.

Few of the subjects belonged to a political party. Fifty-two percent described their political views as radical or liberal. When asked whether they belonged to or would like to join a women's liberation group, 10.5 percent were affirmative. The others did not wish to be identified with the organized movement.

TRADITION VS. LIBERATION

In considering the findings from the inventories of the participants who completed both the survey and the followup procedure, with a focus upon key results from the comparison of the sub-group pair, Gp. I (T) vs. Gp. II (L), the following things were learned:

Group I (T) consisted of 47 women who were among those with scores in the upper 30 percent of the distribution of total scores for Section C of the SRI. You will recall that this portion of the inventory generated a total score indicating whether the respondent had given a traditional or a liberationist sex-role response.

Group II (L) was composed of 46 women who had scored within the lower 30 percent of the distribution of total scores from Section C of the SRI.

The data analysis showed that distinctly different value and personality profiles and life-style patterns emerged between the groups. Traditionals and Liberationists were differentiated according to expectations commonly held for each respective sex-role. In this regard, the sex-role inventory established itself as a valid instrument

capable of differentiating between Traditional and Liberationist groups, as well as among groups with differing life-styles, sex-role attitudes and preferences, and levels of cognitive dissonance.

With regard to biographical information, T's were significantly more likely to have been married longer, to be older, to have more preschool children, to have fewer degrees, and to show less approval for public day-care facilities. T's were also more likely to have husbands who disapproved of wives working outside of the home. T's were more frequently seen to have come from homes where the father had made all the major decisions related to family life, and where the mother had never worked outside the home.

When cognitive dissonance was added in the analysis, T's still presented a rather "stereotypic" pattern. T's more frequently looked after home maintenance, child-care, and cooking tasks than did the L's, and more frequently preferred not to change the task performance situation. L's often looked after these tasks but preferred that they be shared with husbands or outside help. Therefore, L's showed a greater tendency to experience cognitive dissonance between the actual situation and the preferred situation.

In terms of the psychological test results, respondents also presented profiles which showed support for commonly held ideas as to what a Traditional or Liberationist woman might be like. In values, T's were significantly more often religious and economical, while L's were more theoretical and political. In personality, T's were deferent, orderly, and abasing whereas L's were autonomous, achieving, and aggressive. With regard to security-insecurity, L's who worked outside the home more often showed that high dissonance was associated with high insecurity. When controlling for work, cognitive dissonance (SRI) was also found to be significantly related to both Dominance and Aggression (Edwards, 1959). Among non-working women, high dissonance was associated with high scores on Order and Abasement.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. The participants in the present investigation were selected on the basis that they were professionally trained. From the survey data it was learned that they were also economically viable, had relatively small families, and were actively participating in the work force or in socially-oriented activities. This suggested a high level of competency, awareness, and social consciousness among members of the sample. (This was also demonstrated in many of the personal letters and comments received from respondents.)

2. Public day-care centres were often approved of, but were infrequently utilized by working participants. This supported the conjecture that women from upper socio-economic strata can economically afford to participate in the dual role in the sense that they can make satisfactory child-care arrangements during their regular hours of absence from the home. However, as is the case in Sweden (Dahlstrom, 1967) the results here directed us towards the

idea that the need for more and better public child-care facilities is essential in the facilitation of new roles for women. (The Status of Women Report, 1971, also supports this idea).

3. Sex-role attitudes, T and L, do co-vary with life-style. Here they related to whether or not subjects worked, had pre-school children, felt secure, obtained advanced degrees, had high achievement needs, or were deferent, orderly, intraceptive, or aggressive. Sex-role attitudes (Traditional or Liberationist) shaped the value directions of the respondents' lives as to whether they were theoretical, political, economic, or religious. In support of this, the Lipman-Blumen (1972) study also found that sex-role ideology was an important factor in predicting values.

4. The purpose of this investigation was to do a survey of married women. Although each member of the sample was professionally trained and on that basis could choose to develop and work in a career, two distinctly different life-style patterns emerged: (a) a style of living wherein the dominant role of the respondent was that of wife and mother — these women were more often tradition-oriented; and (b) a style of living wherein the participant pursued the dual role of wife and mother along with working outside the home. These respondents more frequently demonstrated a liberationist orientation. The Sex-Role Inventory (Schmidt, 1972) was further able to differentiate between Traditional and Liberationist participants. Respondents here formed two sub-groups — Group I (T) and Group II (L) — which evidenced distinguishing biographical, childhood, personality and value differences. These characteristics were, as previously stated, consistent with social-cultural expectations for women living within a traditional as opposed to a liberationist mode (sex-role linked attitudes, preferences and/or behaviors.) A major implication from the findings here is that the SRI (Schmidt, 1972) is a valid instrument which has demonstrated its ability to differentiate between groups. It is, therefore, a viable survey questionnaire which would be useful in future research in this area.

5. The Edwards Personal Preference Schedule further demonstrated its merit as a valid research instrument. Personality variables for the two subgroups, Traditional and Liberationist, were defined in accord with common expectations regarding the respective sex-roles, i.e. Traditionals were deferent and orderly, while Liberationists tended toward aggressiveness and autonomy.

6. Another key finding was that there are diverse sex-roles in modern Canadian society. This implies that the role for women is changing and, further, that professional women are cognizant of this. A recommendation relevant here is that future research continue to explore the relationship between sex-role choices and fluctuating social expectations regarding appropriate sex-role behavior.

7. In the findings of the present study, dissonance between actual sex-role in contrast with preferred sex-role was identified. Results affirmed the worthwhileness of future investigations with a familiar focus. The process of dissonance resolution would also provide a worthwhile focus for future work in the area.

8. The lack of active political involvement among women involved in this study suggests that much potential is being lost to the public. Well defined attempts should be made to tap this resource.

9. Other implications and recommendations for further research arising from this work are:

(a) since the present study considered only middle-class, well-educated married women, it would be commendable for future research to replicate the work using a sample drawn from populations of women from other socio-economic, educational, and marital status groups;

(b) that a similar project be carried out nationally with a large sample, including professional married women from all urban centres; this would increase the generalizability of results;

(c) that in future surveys, both husbands and wives be included in the sample; it would be useful to see how the husbands of traditionalists or liberationists perceive their wives' sex-role behavior in relation to their own attitudes;

(d) that future surveys can be expanded from the present questionnaire on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach, i.e. sociological, social-psychological, anthropological, political, and economic expertise have much to contribute as a team with regard to the more precise understanding of the changing role of women;

(e) in relation to counseling psychology, the role of women is changing and the consequences of insisting that people adjust to outmoded concepts may not be adaptive, nor is it in the best interest of the client. Recommendations consistent with this are that psychologists must do more than stay alert to change in sex-role needs and attitudes, that counselors and therapists alike should endeavor to formulate modern personality and vocational theories, and to develop vocational interest tests that are applicable to women.

RESUME: Considérant l'intérêt que l'on porte aujourd'hui aux attitudes sociales vis-à-vis les rôles sexuels on a entrepris cette recherche en vue (1) d'étudier le style de vie, certaines données biographiques particulières et les attitudes et les préférences de femmes mariées envers les rôles sexuels et, (2), de déterminer l'existence de relations entre ces variables et d'autres données obtenues à des tests psychologiques. Le "Sex-Role Inventory" (Schmidt, 1972) s'est avéré un instrument valable pour différencier entre les groupes traditionnels et les groupes d'avant-garde, de même qu'entre les groupes avec différents modes de vie, différentes préférences et attitudes vis-à-vis des rôles sexuels et différents niveaux de dissonance cognitive. Le EPPS et le "Study of Values" ont aussi révélé des différences entre les groupes.

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